

Mechanics make a good buck in the Klondike goldfields

NEW GOLD RUSH? MECHANICS MAKE A GOOD BUCK IN THE KLONDIKE GOLDFIELDS

by Andy Turnbull

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The truck is a tandem Kenworth flatbed conventional with a ten-ton hydraulic crane mounted on it, plus a 400-amp welder, an air compressor, power plant and other little incidents. It's worth more than \$10,000 a summer.

McCully's a New Zealander, and he started working as a garage mechanic in his home town of Nelson nearly 20 years ago. He found it a bit tame, though, so he went to Australia to work for some mines in the outback and then to New Guinea to work for a contractor. The New Guinea job was a drag, and after he'd been there about six months he and other men had a few drinks together and they decided to quit as a group. One of them was a Canadian from Alberta and he talked the others into coming to Canada with him. The group broke up after it got here, but that's how Gerry McCully wound up in the Yukon.

Destiny

"I guess it's something subconscious to wind up working in the bush somewhere, I must like it."

The biggest job in the Yukon in 1967 was the opening of the new Anvil base metals mine at Faro, and McCully wound up working there for a while, but then they built a town and he moved on. He worked as a mechanic in the bush most summers and he worked in Whitehorse winters, because there is no winter in the bush in the Yukon. He was starting to build up a bit of a stake until 1971, when he met a mining engineer and he caught gold fever.

That's a common disease in the Yukon, where nearly every creek has some gold and where some men have become millionaires by finding the right creek. There's only one cure: Total bankruptcy keeps the disease in check, but the only complete cure is to find more gold than you can mine in a lifetime.

Hydraulic mine

McCully took the temporary cure by pouring every cent he could raise over the next few years into an unsuccessful hydraulic mine on Livingstone Creek about 50 miles north of Whitehorse. When he was dead broke and up to his ears in debt, he went back to work as a mechanic in the goldfields of the Klondike—one of the most insane gold rushes in human history back in 1898 and a major mining center until the mid-1960's.

The big mining companies pulled out in the 1960's when their costs—even with a government subsidy—made it too expensive to mine gold at \$36 an ounce. Some small miners stayed on, though—mining was a way of life for them, not a business—and some of them are sitting pretty now. Modern bulldozers make it cheaper to mine

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Service trucks that follow heavy machinery in the Arctic wasteland are not so much luxury as necessity. They must, however, carry everything needed to service the machines that will gold as a rock on gold.

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THE KLONDIKE GOLDFIELDS
NEW GOLD RUSH? MECHANICS MAKE A GOOD BUCK IN

by Andy Turnbull

Canadian Automotive Trade November, 1979

Mechanics make a good buck in the Klondike goldfields



What's that bright yellow gleam down there in the dirt? Can it be . . . ?

All the mechanics reading this know that theirs can be an exciting profession, but just in case they forget that, here's a story about a trio of mechanics and mechanically-inclined individuals who are leading a really exciting life in the new Cariboo gold rush. Their main tools are their skills and their super service trucks.

by Andy Turnbull

GERRY McCULLY got a service truck last spring partly because he tied one on in a bar in New Guinea 12 years ago. He was the best-paid

mechanic in the Klondike gold fields last summer partly because of the service truck.

The truck is a tandem Kenworth flatbed conventional with a ten-ton hydraulic crane mounted on it, plus a 400-amp welder, an air compressor, power plant and other little incidentals. It's worth more than \$50,000, McCully figures, but it helped him make about \$10,000 a month during the summer.

McCully's a New Zealander, and he started working as a garage mechanic in his home town of Nelson nearly 20 years ago. He found it a bit tame, though, so he went to Australia to work for some mines in the outback and then to New Guinea to work for a contractor. The New Guinea job was a drag, and after he'd been there about six months he and a few other men had a few drinks together and they decided to quit as a group. One of them was a Canadian from Alberta and he talked the others into coming to Canada with him. The group broke up after it got here, but that's how Gerry McCully wound up in the Yukon.

Destiny

"I guess it's something subconscious", he says. "Anywhere I go I seem to wind up working in the bush somewhere. I must like it."

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That's a common disease in the Yukon, where nearly every creek has some gold and where some men have become millionaires by finding the right creek. There's only one cure. Total bankruptcy keeps the disease in check, but the only complete cure is to find more gold than you can mine in a lifetime.

Hydraulic mine

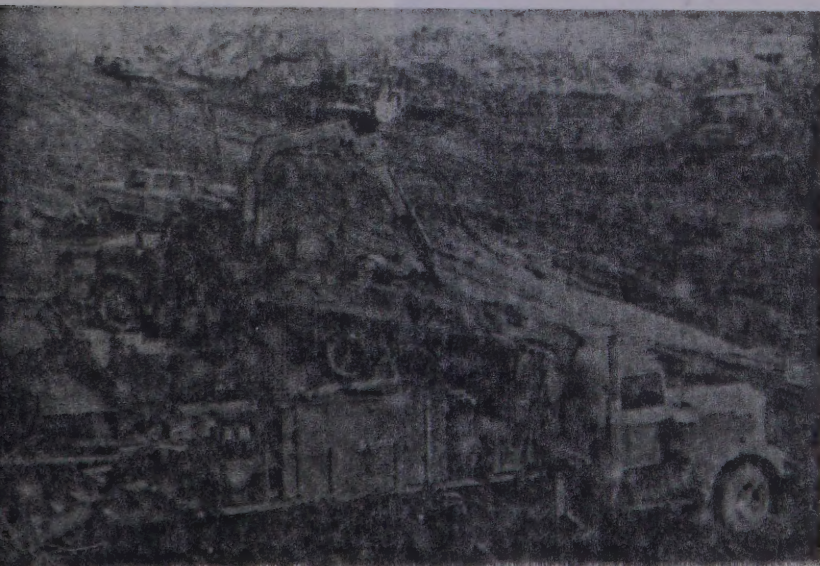
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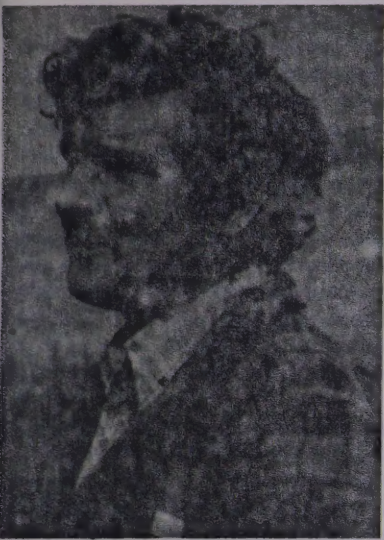
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Service trucks that follow heavy equipment into the Arctic wasteland are not meant to look pretty. They must, however, carry everything needed to service the monsters that pan gold on a modern scale.

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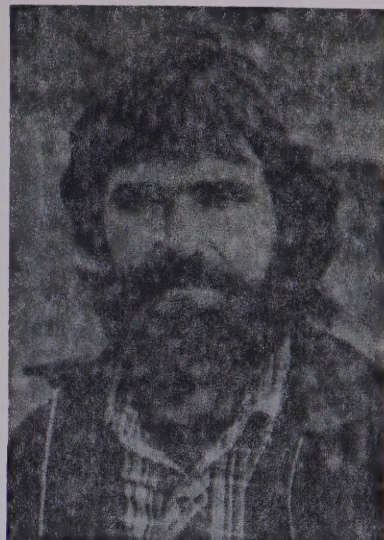




Ken Bennett mines a couple of claims some distance out of Dawson City.



Goldfield mechanic. Today McCully is trying to build up a poke large enough for another crack at mining his claim. Tomorrow it might be a different story, and that's what's exciting about the new goldfield economics.



Gary Crawford is another one of McCully's old buddies who came to the Yukon looking for a way to make a lot of money in a big hurry, and the exciting thing is, he just might do it.

gold, and the stuff now sells for almost \$400 an ounce.

Rush is on

Because of that, there's another gold rush in the Klondike right now, and where there were only about a dozen small mines ten years ago, there were more than 100 last summer. About half of them are going broke, of course, but that's part of the game.

"It's something like poker", McCully says. "You have to put some money into the pot to see what you've got, and most people lose."

The mechanics and the cat skinnners are all winners, though, and a mechanic who can run heavy equipment and do a bit of welding on the side can take his choice of jobs.

Two types

The gold of the Klondike is placer gold—dust and nuggets mixed up in gravel—and the two basic mines in the area are cat mines and hydraulics. A cat miner moves the gravel with heavy equipment—bulldozers, loaders and sometimes scrapers—

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Moving a tire from an earth mover is only one job the crane must handle.

Welding equipment—both gas and arc—occupies a prominent portion of the platform. The crane, too is indispensable. Compressors, starters, fluid pumps and a full range of hand tools are also a must.



and a hydraulic miner moves it with high-powered pumps and high-pressure hoses. Hydraulic mines need heavy equipment also, to move the gravel around the sluice boxes, and cat mines need pumps to move the water for their sluice boxes. A lot of mines work both ways anyway, and they all need mechanics to keep their equipment operating. They keep a staff mechanic if they can afford one, because down-time on a machine is counted in gold not mined.

Heavy equipment needs regular maintenance. One miner figures it costs between \$10,000 and \$15,000 in parts and repairs to keep his D 8 Caterpillar working for a 120-day season. Since the mines of the Klondike can work only in the summer months when the creeks are thawed, they often overwork the equipment.

Old equipment

A lot of the equipment is mostly junk. A new D 8 cat—one of the most popular bulldozers in the Klondike—costs more than \$250,000 this year, and that's a bit much for a one or two-man operation. A lot of them are running on a borrowed shoestring anyway.

That's what McCully was thinking about when he started his own company—McCully Contracting—last winter, and when he got his service truck in the spring. He knew there would be more work than he could handle at \$30 an hour in the gold-fields for the summer. He rented a garage in Porter Creek near Whitehorse so he could work for himself in the winter.

The used truck cost \$30,000 with the used crane on it but McCully needed the crane to work on heavy equipment—an engine for a big bulldozer weighs about four-and-a-half tons—and he needed the truck to carry the crane. The truck can carry heavy parts, too.

Welder necessary

McCully needed the welder because earthmoving machines need hard surfacing on their blades even when they're not broken down and he needed the air compressor to run his air wrenches and to inflate the tires—usually 29.5x29—on the

loaders and scrapers. The small power plant powers some tools and the three 500-watt quartz-iodine floodlamps for night work.

McCully was going to move to Dawson City—headquarters for the Klondike mining area—for the summer and set up a house trailer. He has a radio telephone in his truck and he figured the miners would call him when they needed help. They probably would have, if he'd done it, but Gary Crawford and Ken Bennett changed his plans.

A Bodyman

Crawford is a New Zealander too—an auto-body man by trade—and he moved to Alaska about 10 years ago hoping to work on the Alaska pipeline. The pipeline didn't go and he wound up driving a bulldozer for an asbestos mine in the Klondike for a couple of years until he could afford to set up his own autobody shop in Whitehorse.

He did okay in the autobody business for a while but then he got gold fever too, and seven years ago he sold out to go into mining. He'd already staked a claim in the Klondike years before.

For four years he went broke every summer, and he paid most of his debts by working 80-hour weeks in auto body shops in the winters. Then he took one summer off for some serious prospecting, and the year before last he made money mining on three separate patches of leased ground. He rounded up some backers, too, and he started last summer with three mines and more than a million dollars worth of equipment.

A Welder

Ken Bennett is an Australian, and his story is something like McCully's and Crawford's. He worked with McCully, as a matter of fact, at one mine in Australia and with Crawford at the asbestos mine. He left school after grade eight in Australia, and he got himself qualified as a welder, heavy-duty mechanic and auto-body man in night school. He's had a truck like McCully's—but mounted on a GMC tandem chassis—for the past three years, and he got into mining as a mechanic.

He never really caught gold fev-



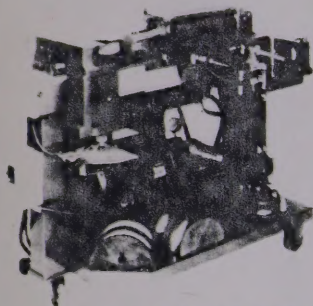
Miners' metal pans and hand-cranked sluice-boxes have been replaced by large mechanical panning devices such as the one in the background. Keeping steel sluiceways in good repair is another job for the welder/mechanic.

Contrary to popular opinion in the local press, this is not the way mechanics do a brake job in Toronto. That's McCully using a sledge to knock caked clay off an earth-mover's wheel hub.



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GOLD

From page 14

er, but he's been working the mines for the past few years and he's fascinated by the problem of getting the gold out of the gravel. He worked for Crawford one year, then last year went into partnership with him on two mines. One mine was to feature a sifter-slucice box combination Bennett invented, the other was going to be hydraulic.

Third man in

Crawford was going to manage his own mine—Goldfield Canada at Bear Creek—and Bennett was going to manage the Quartz Creek Joint Ventures mine on Quartz Creek, but they needed someone to run the other QCJV mine on Monte Cristo Hill, near Bonanza Creek. They hired McCully to do it at \$25 an hour.

That's about \$9,000 a month the way most miners work in the Klondike—12 hours a day and seven days a week—but it's more like \$10,000 with McCully's room, board and fuel thrown in, Crawford figures. It's good money, for a mechanic.

Good pay

Regular rates in the Klondike run about \$12 an hour for a mechanic this year, but McCully is worth more, Crawford says, because he's more than a mechanic. He's a welder and a fabricator, too. He has the service truck he needs to keep heavy equipment running, and he has experience with hydraulic mining.

The Monte Cristo mine was based on a 9,400 gallons-per-minute pump powered by a 750 hp diesel engine—worth about \$95,000—on Bonanza Creek about 120 feet below the hill. The water was pumped through eight-inch pipe to a monitor—a mounted nozzle with a two-inch bore—against the side of the cliff where it melted the permafrost and blasted the gravel down. It would also knock down a house if one happened to get in the way.

Big equipment

Gravel knocked down by the monitor was hauled to the sluice box by a 70-ton loader with a 10-yard bucket, and a bulldozer

cleared the tailings away from the bottom of the box.

McCully had five men and a cook to work with, and his job was to keep the whole show running 24 hours a day.

He did it too, but only for a month and a half because there just wasn't enough gold in the hill to pay for the operation. He wasn't out of a job when Monte Cristo closed though, because it was taking Ken Bennett a lot longer than he planned to finish his new machine on Quartz Creek.

That job's closed too, by now. The mines close when the creeks freeze solid, and the creeks freeze early in the Klondike, so McCully is back working as a freelance mechanic. Bennett is doing a bit of mechanicking too, when he's not designing new machines, and both Bennett and Crawford are wheeling and dealing for more land to mine next summer, and more backers to pay the shot. Crawford wants to start the year with at least three and maybe four mines.

McCully may be working for them next summer and then again he may not, because with more mines next year, Crawford and Bennett just might need a new partner. The three of them have talked it over a couple of times, but there's nothing definite yet.

One thing is certain, though. McCully will be back in the Klondike next year with one of the biggest service trucks you've ever seen, and he'll be making the kind of money most city mechanics can only dream about. □

CENTURY

From page 15

across Canada and the US who feel the same. These are the people who sell Century welders and chargers under private brand labels. They include many of the major automotive and hardware chains. There is a whole wall of charger and welder face plates printed for the different brand-name distributors on Century's silk-screening press.

While Lee Sundet is delighted with their business, he is quick to point out that his favorite brand of Century welder and charger is Solar—their own label. □

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